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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 PARIS 001168

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/20/2018
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SUBJECT: NEA A/S WELCH DISCUSSION OF LEBANON/SYRIA AT
FRENCH MFA, JUNE 12, 2008

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

1. (C) Summary: Lebanon/Syria dominated NEA-themed discussions between visiting NEA A/S Welch and his French MFA counterpart, Jean Felix-Paganon, June 12. Felix-Paganon and members of his team voiced relative satisfaction with the situation in Lebanon after the Doha accord but were watching closely the formation of the new government and implementation of UNSCR 1701. French follow-up, including lending crucial support to the Lebanese Armed Forces, will depend on how the GOF assesses developments. France remains committed to eventual creation of the Special Tribunal and will participate in the Vienna conference on Nahr al-Barid (but not offer a financial contribution). Felix-Paganon welcomed the notion of developing jointly a list of principles to govern Lebanese/Syrian state-to-state relations that would ensure equality between the two and suggested using Arab League charter language as a starting point. The French outlined their differences with Israel's analysis of Hizballah capabilities in southern Lebanon, and Felix-Paganon doubted Iran would sanction a new Hizballah conflict with Israel this summer. During the working meeting and a follow-up lunch, Welch and the French exchanged views on France's controversial decision to reengage with Syria at a senior level. French Presidency NEA adviser Boris Boillon, who acknowledged Syria's "spoiler" role in the region, stressed that French President Sarkozy would act cautiously vis-a-vis Damascus but genuinely believed in "salvation diplomacy" to change Syrian behavior for the better. The lunch featured discussion of setting benchmarks for Syrian behavior, which Boillon stated would guide Sarkozy's future interaction with Asad, including at the July 13 summit in Paris to launch the Union for the Mediterranean Union. End summary

2. (SBU) NEA A/S Welch held extensive bilateral consultations on key NEA issues with French MFA counterparts in Paris on June 12. This cable focuses on Lebanon/Syria; other topics reported septel (notal). Participants included:

USG

--NEA A/S David Welch
--Deputy Legal Adviser Jonathan Schwartz
--Embassy Paris Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt
--Embassy Paris NEA Watcher (notetaker)
--NEA Staff Assistant Mustafa Popal

GOF

--French MFA NEA A/S-equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon

--French MFA NEA Adviser to the Foreign Minister, Christophe Bigot
--French MFA IO Adviser to the Foreign Minister Alice Guitton
--French MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille
--French MFA IO desk officer for NEA Salina Grenet
--French MFA Lebanon desk Officer Thierry Vallat (notetaker)

Lebanon

13. (C) A/S Welch began by asking his French counterpart, Jean Felix-Paganon, how the GOF saw things in Lebanon. Felix-Paganon responded "better after the Doha accord" despite some initial skepticism about the agreement. Overall, he continued, we and the Lebanese are better off even if the accord is not a "magnificent achievement." Most important, the drift to chaos has stopped. Lebanese President Sleiman is a "relatively good guy," which Felix-Paganon characterized as a "positive surprise." Sleiman told Kouchner in Beirut the day of the presidential election that he had resisted Syrian pressure to go to Damascus prior to being elected as well as to accept six Syrian-proposed ministers into the new cabinet. France was pleased with Sleiman's inauguration speech. In short, according to Felix-Paganon, we have cleared an important hurdle.

14. (C) Among the things France will watch next are the composition of the new government, how the GOL moves to implement UNSCR 1701, and whether progress is possible to resolve the dispute over Sheb'a Farms (a settlement of which, France believes, generates little enthusiasm in either Syria

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or Israel). France does not believe much will happen in any of these areas pending formation of a new Lebanese government, which Felix-Paganon expected to drag out because of innumerable "irrational and illogical" disputes among Lebanese leaders. The regional situation would also ultimately influence any action. French MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Pouille interjected that external support to the GOL generally and PM Siniora was key. French President Sarkozy promised in his recent visit to Beirut to reinforce French support, and French PM Fillon (who accompanied Sarkozy) will return soon to establish formal working ties with the new Lebanese government.

15. (C) Parallel to this political track, Pouille reported the GOF is poised to increase its support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). France, however, is waiting for the new LAF chief of staff to be named before doing too much in this regard. Pouille contended that Sleiman, for his part, was waiting for concrete western support to the LAF and diplomatic support in resolving the Sheb'a Farms dispute, which would be critical to his strategy for containing Hizballah. Felix-Paganon agreed that helping the LAF was an area in which the U.S. and France should consult and cooperate. We saw in the recent clashes in Lebanon a clear desire by the LAF not to confront the armed factions or to enforce GOL policy. This episode was disturbingly similar to the LAF's longtime reluctance to deploy south of the Litani River. Felix-Paganon argued that any desire to reinforce or supply the LAF had to be balanced by a clear-eyed assessment of what it can actually do.

16. (C) Pouille raised two other Lebanon-related issues: (1) the Special Tribunal and Sleiman's clear declaration of support for its operation in his inaugural speech, albeit in a politically neutral manner and not as leverage over Syria, and (2) the Vienna Conference on the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp that France will attend but not at a ministerial level and without pledging any funds. Pouille explained that France is hard-pressed, given its Paris III financial obligations, to contribute more at this time. Moreover, France's focus on Nahr al-Barid would be strictly humanitarian, not political, and it would look to the GOL to

set the lead on how to proceed in terms of reconstruction.

17. (C) Welch observed that Lebanon is at a pivotal moment as it prepares to face parliamentary elections in May 2009. For the U.S. and France, U.S. elections and the French EU presidency will be dominant in the months ahead but will have linkages to the situation in Lebanon. Despite some initial internal criticism of and debate about the Doha accord, the USG accepts it and even considers that it reflects our desire that Lebanon's problems be internationalized. The USG preferred that countries in the region assume responsibility for helping Lebanon deal with this crisis and not defer to Syria. International community interest and pressure finally helped lead to the Doha accord via a more effective Arab League and balanced and deft Qatari diplomacy. Moving forward, Welch added, France agreed in Kuwait on the need to press for normal state-to-state relations between Lebanon and Syria. We should establish early on principles of equality so that the Syrians will not use the occasion to exact a high price from the Lebanese for a "normal" relationship.

18. (C) Welch praised France's high-level engagement with Sleiman but said President Bush was unlikely to visit Lebanon as Sarkozy had done, although we have invited Sleiman to visit the U.S. Our support to the LAF and Internal Security Forces was steadily increasing to where it is now around USD 350 million, mostly in straight materiel. The USG hopes to use the time before the 2009 elections to reinforce the moderates' political position. We are prepared to look at Sheb'a Farms but need to discuss the subject further. As for the Special Tribunal, the process to set it up is proceeding, and we understand that Special Prosecutor Bellemare wants more time to continue his investigation. The USG is responding to his request for more and higher quality information. Washington prefers to "approach this more like Canada," i.e., we do not want or need to know the results or the status. Regarding the Nahr al-Barid conference, Undersecretary Burns will likely represent the USG and announce a USD 15-20 million contribution. Welch also called for the U.S. and France to "memorialize" their continued cooperation on Lebanon to dispel the public impression that different signals between Washington and Paris on Syria and the Doha accord suggest deeper differences on goals. We should provide reassurance to the region that we remain

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united and use the POTUS visit to Paris for that purpose.
(Note: The U.S. and French governments issued such a statement June 14. End note)

19. (C) As regards pressing for normal state-to-state relations, Felix-Paganon said this should be viable given its consistency with international practice and the Arab League's charter provisions. In short, it should be an easy way to press Damascus and foster bilateral goodwill between Lebanon and Syria. To be operational and practical, it was important to agree on priorities in a manner that avoided allowing others to manipulate divergences in terms of emphasis between Washington and Paris. Welch agreed on the importance of getting the public elements of state-to-state relations "out there" to counter any Syrian attempt to manipulate normalization to Lebanon's disadvantage. He recounted the claims of several Arab League interlocutors that Asad had told them "Lebanon doesn't know what it's getting into" by seeking true state-to-state relations. Felix-Paganon repeated that we should use the Arab League charter as a starting point in identifying these elements. As for the Tribunal, Felix-Paganon maintained that the big question was how important is it to Asad? If it is big for him, we cannot afford to "be Canadian." The Tribunal will inevitably become quite "political" depending on what Bellemare concludes.

110. (C) Welch asked for the French take on the recent Israeli briefing to the UNSC on Hizballah's rearmament and criticisms of UNIFIL's operations in its area of operations. Felix-Paganon answered that France generally does not share

or agree with Israel's assessment. MFA IO desk officer for Middle East issues Salina Grenet added that France has "suspicions but not proof" to back up Israeli claims of massive rearmament south of the Litani River. When Welch wondered whether the figure of 3000 Hizballah fighters was accurate, Pouille responded "probably more" with Felix-Paganon noting that Hizballah's capacity to mobilize many more reserves was strong. Welch asked whether the Italian and French governments, given their UNIFIL contingents presence, have their own sense of Hizballah's strength south of the Litani. Pouille replied they are "present" but in unknown numbers. Hizballah takes pains to work closely with UNIFIL to avoid problems. Felix-Paganon reiterated longstanding French concerns about rearmament activity occurring north of the Litani and outside UNIFIL's area of operations.

¶11. (C) Deputy Legal Adviser Schwartz asked whether France thought Iran might ask Hizballah to take action this summer to distract from international concern about the nuclear issue. Felix-Paganon demurred, arguing that Iran regarded its position as strong in terms of being able to set up more centrifuges and make further progress on its nuclear program with virtual impunity (see septel notal). He saw a problem for Iran vis-a-vis Hizballah in terms of Iran's limited control over that movement should a conflict break out. Felix-Paganon doubted that Iran wanted a conflict that would hurt Iran's image. FM Kouchner's NEA adviser Bigot interjected that Hizballah seeks to strengthen its capabilities overall but has its eye on how, as a political movement, it can perform well in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Welch said he agreed generally with that assessment, but Hizballah occasionally acts in ways that are not entirely related to its immediate interests. He cited as an example Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah using a speech primarily on Israel and Lebanon to echo Iranian criticisms of the U.S. presence and policy in Iraq. Felix-Paganon concluded this phase of the discussion by contending that uncertainty about U.S. elections has created a lull in southern Lebanon as Hizballah and others wait to see what happens.

Syria

¶12. (C) Returning to one of Welch's initial points about potential public confusion about French signals vis-a-vis Syria, Felix-Paganon recalled that one of the first things Sarkozy called for upon becoming president was a new relationship with Damascus. Sarkozy set as an initial benchmark the timely election of a new Lebanese president. When that did not occur, Sarkozy suspended his and the Elysee's engagement with Syria but with the commitment to resume once an election occurred. Felix-Paganon argued, therefore, that France had been consistent, and French policy had shown continuity. He assured Welch that the GOF would

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watch to see whether Asad responds positively. He further argued that the stakes were higher than just Lebanon now that the Syrian/Israeli track has reopened. Those discussions, in Felix-Paganon's opinion, would have an impact on Lebanon; indeed, the Lebanese will fear that a Syrian/Israeli deal will come at their expense.

¶13. (C) Welch said he did not entirely disagree with Felix-Paganon's argument but he would state it differently. Hizballah has a firm foothold in Lebanon's Shi'a community, and that poses a serious problem. We need to address Syrian activities. Even if the U.S. approach may not work, the French approach has not proven itself to be any better. Welch contended that Asad remains on the fringes of Arab politics, despite Felix-Paganon's "glass half full" reading of attendance at the Damascus Arab summit. Although the USG is aware of Lebanese -- and Palestinian -- fears of being sold out, that is highly unlikely given the reality of the

relationship between Damascus and Tel Aviv.

Working Lunch Addendum

¶14. (C) The French MFA later held a working lunch for A/S Welch to continue the discussion. The director of FM Kouchner's private office Philippe Etienne and NEA adviser at the French Presidency Boris Boillon joined the group. Etienne asked Welch for an assessment of the dialogue between Israel and Syria. A/S Welch replied that we do not think much of it so far and point to the fact that it continues to be conducted indirectly. In the USG view, it is related to the attack on the suspected nuclear reactor site at al-Kibar in northeastern Syria. The Syrians are treating this dialogue seriously, but the USG sees a big contrast between what the Israelis are doing to support it and the mammoth support effort for the Palestinian negotiations. Welch argued that this likely reflected different levels of "maturity" in the two tracks as well as the different final goals. He stated that, for the USG, one issue we have with the Israeli dialogue with Syria is that it gives Syrian President Asad more room for maneuver than we would like.

¶15. (C) French Presidency NEA adviser Boillon referred to a clear divergence of analysis between Paris and Washington on how to deal with Syria. "You think it is important to maintain Syria's isolation, but President Sarkozy believes it is important to engage," he summarized. Boillon explained Sarkozy's different view in part because Sarkozy does not share negative USG past experiences of dealing with Syria. (Comment: Nor, for that matter, does he share the same view of Syria's negative past record as his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, whose close personal ties to former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in large measure motivated his determination to press and then isolate Syria after Hariri's assassination. End comment) Boillon contended that Asad understands the benefits of breaking out of his isolation and the need to change Syria's behavior.

¶16. (C) Etienne asked whether the USG saw merit in establishing benchmarks, as the Elysee wants to do, for Syrian behavior. Welch answered that we see risks in the GOF approach, including via benchmarks. What happens when everyone seems content with Syria's conduct but then Syria reverts to its former behavior? Welch agreed, nonetheless, that benchmarks would be useful in terms of Lebanese/Syrian state-to-state relations with the understanding that they would not be limited to ensuring non-interference. Bigot interjected that non-interference in Lebanon would at least be an improvement in Syrian behavior. Boillon called Syria a spoiler in the region and non-interference a positive starting point on which France and the U.S. could build to establish other requirements. He referred to the Elysee's intention to set "objective and subjective" benchmarks. The former would include the specific, formal benchmarks we can lay down related to state-to-state relations between Syria and Lebanon and other subjects. Boillon asserted that Sarkozy would "never go to Damascus without first achieving objective benchmarks." The subjective ones, he went on, would be different and apply to things that are not as easy to measure but possible to judge such as Syria's indirect role in the formation of a new Lebanese government.

¶17. (C) Etienne wondered about benchmarks for Syria related to Iraq. Welch responded that Iraqi PM Maliki is angry with Syria over border security -- mostly illegal arms flows -- and contrasts problems along the Syrian border with the

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better situation along other frontiers. The USG is obviously concerned about foreign fighters slipping into Iraq from Syria. The flows seem to have slowed, but Syrian enforcement of border controls remains inconsistent. Welch stressed that the movement across the borders was also not just foreign fighters.

¶18. (C) Boillon raised the Union for the Mediterranean as he began to talk about France's use of "salvation diplomacy" with "bad guys" like Asad. Sarkozy's intention, he went on, was to involve them in positive regional diplomatic endeavors with the aim of changing their behavior. Welch quipped about the negative optics and irony of the GOF hosting foreign dictators, including Asad, on Bastille Day in commemoration of France's commitment to human rights. (Note: the GOF has invited Asad and others to attend Bastille Day celebrations following the July 13 Med-Union Summit. End note). Boillon cited Libya as a positive example that even the U.S. refers to of how this diplomatic approach can work. Welch cautioned that such an approach needs to make clear publicly that French engagement with Syria is not being undertaken as a reward to that regime and that France is not acting as a supplicant. Etienne contended that a major problem in dealing firmly with Syria comes from within the Arab world, where there is no consensus in terms of how to judge Syrian behavior. He lamented as well problems within the EU to coordinate a common policy vis-a-vis Syria. FM Kouchner was personally watching closely to see what Syria does with respect to human rights, nuclear nonproliferation, terrorism, and Iraq.

¶19. (C) In a final word on Lebanon, Welch argued that UNSCRs must be observed, including provisions prohibiting the supply of weapons to non-governmental elements. Syria and Iran are clearly in violation of these restrictions. The U.S. and France must find the means to ensure their implementation.

¶20. (U) A/S Welch has cleared this cable.

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